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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PRISTINA 000749

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SUBJECT: KOSOVO: COM INAUGURATES US KFOR/USAID PROJECT IN PARTES

Classified By: COM Tina S. Kaidanow for reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. At the inauguration of a joint USKFOR/USAID community development project in the Serb enclave of Partes (Gjilan/Gnjilane municipality), COM and other visitors witnessed genuine appreciation from local Serbs for USKFOR/USG efforts on their behalf. This project, the first official building (other than a police substation) in a town that will be the center of a future Serb-majority municipality under the Ahtisaari Plan, demonstrated the potential for our cooperation in many Serb enclaves. Nonetheless, as noted by local political leader Vesna Jovanovic, future implementation of Ahtisaari-mandated decentralization provisions will remain a challenge, due mostly to pressure from Belgrade. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) On October 15, COM traveled to the Serb enclave of Partes (Gjilan/Gnjilane municipality) to inaugurate a community center and playground built by USKFOR and furnished by USAID. When this project was being developed, the community council had identified the need for a place for local children to meet outside of school. The land eventually chosen for the building is the former site of the town's garbage dump, a fact emphasized by many locals during the inauguration ceremony. USKFOR contributed USD 164,000 for construction and USAID furnished USD 50,000 to equip the facility, as well as provide English language and computer training classes. The center includes a soccer/basketball field, a playground for younger children, and a three-room building with a computer lab.

¶3. (SBU) With Serb-language media in attendance, COM and COMUSKFOR BG Earhart addressed a lively crowd of locals, including many school children. In comparison with several other recent project inaugurations in Serb areas, crowd involvement and general atmospherics were much more positive.

Serbian List for Kosovo and Metohija (SLKM) Kosovo Assembly Member and Serbian Social Democratic Party member Vesna Jovanovic, who is from Partes and worked to coordinate this project, gave certificates of appreciation to all involved, including USOP and USAID, emphasizing the role played by a Kosovo Albanian construction firm (which had employed many

local Serbs). (Note: Jovanovic, along with her SLKM colleagues, is not participating in this year's elections due to heavy pressure from Belgrade. End Note.)

¶ 14. (C) After the event, Jovanovic spoke with us about the state of affairs in Partes, acknowledging the community's almost-complete dependence on USKFOR for survival. She praised USKFOR's work with the local Serb population, noting what she considered a real improvement in relations over the last three years: "for example, (three years ago) the teachers would never have released all the students to attend this event."

¶ 15. (C) Turning to the upcoming November 17 elections, she pointed to the many barriers faced by would-be Serb politicians, saying "even in 2004, it was a bloody war trying to get people to vote," and pointed to even more difficult conditions this time. While blaming the bleak electoral outlook on boycott pressure emanating from Belgrade and lack of accurate information about elections and basic information in Serb-language media about Kosovo, she also explained that her two terms in the Kosovo Assembly had not bought her (or anyone else) credibility among Kosovo Serbs. For example, she reported that many Serbs have asked her "What did you do in the Assembly? What laws were you able to change or prevent?" (Note: Despite these feelings, Jovanovic later gave an interview to Serb-language Radio KIM, in which she called on Serbs to vote in the upcoming elections. End Note.)

¶ 16. (C) Jovanovic also acknowledged the negative impact of Serb non-participation on the upcoming Ahtisaari-mandated decentralization process. Looking ahead to the possibility of a Serb boycott of Kosovo elections and institutions and

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the prospect of Serb parallel elections, she asked "who will you find to work with you (the international community) to run these new municipalities?" Continuing to state an opinion she has voiced in the media in recent weeks, she called for more "maturity" in Kosovo politics, and said she was happy to praise effective Albanian politicians in public.

She maintained hope that cooperation with the international community would continue regardless of the outcome of the upcoming elections or the status process. We reassured her that it would.

COMMENT

¶ 17. (C) The enthusiasm demonstrated by Partes' Serbs towards this USG-funded project, along with the active, positive role played by local leaders in its execution is a welcome sign. Native daughter Vesna Jovanovic's praise has been echoed by other Serbs, including even hardline members of Belgrade's Coordinating Center for Kosovo (CCK). We will continue to look for such opportunities to work with Serb enclaves, particularly in USKFOR's areas of responsibility.

¶ 18. (C) Jovanovic's comments on the political situation go to the heart of the Kosovo Serb position south of the Ibar - pressure from Belgrade and non-participation in Kosovo institutions have resulted in a dearth of local leadership and representation, which only reinforces pre-existing fears.

Despite these challenges, we can encourage Serbs to vote and convince them that working with international partners (especially the ICO) to implement the Ahtisaari Plan's decentralization scheme is the only effective way to preserve the Serb presence in Kosovo.

KAIDANOW